

Chapter Nine

Conclusion

The dialectics of change

There is now considerable agreement that more needs to be done to regulate abstract financial markets (see Elliot, 2014). Politicians of every stripe line up to tell us how they plan to protect civil society from the market's interminable boom and bust cycle, which itself, in an age of declining resources, is destined to bump along the bottom rather than reach the high points of capitalism's post-war industrial heyday. Even those on the neoliberal right who remain inextricably tied to the logic of deregulation tell us that we need new forms of regulation that control potentially harmful practices. But regulation should not impede the diligent and socially responsible wealth creators who constitute the majority of the financial services community. The majority should not be held responsible for the criminal behaviours of a disreputable few.

Many people across the Eurozone now know that liberal capitalism is dangerously unpredictable and grossly unfair. The 2008 crash remains with us, and its scale and destructiveness will not easily be forgotten. However, this knowledge of capitalism's dark side has not prompted a drive to replace it with something else. Like the man besotted by an inappropriate and unruly lover, we are so intoxicated by the thrill of the good times that we are willing to put up with the bad. We ignore the infidelities and forgive the hurtful remarks because we remember the good times as truly exceptional. Our errant and capricious lover might yet rehabilitate herself and the good times will return.

We know that capitalism has the power to radically disrupt our lives and cause us great pain, but we also believe that capitalism equips us with wondrous gifts that act as compensation. After we have sat waiting for hours with dinner spoiling in the oven, our lover turns up with an apology and the gifts of mass consumption, technological innovation and something that looks like boundless cultural novelty and diversity. Of course, these gifts are not really capitalism's to give, but we are so besotted that we say 'thank you' and give our lover another chance. We hope things will improve, but secretly we know they will not because, ultimately, our lover cannot return our love.

Resigned to our fate, we learn to live with the ups and downs and try to convince ourselves that we are adventurers and gamblers at heart and therefore thrilled by the unpredictability of it all. We believe that this is how it is, how it has always been and how it always will be. We lie to ourselves and dismiss stability as stultifying and uninteresting. We stop hoping for something better. Indeed, we begin to doubt that such a thing really exists. We cynically dismiss those who tell us that another way is possible and convince ourselves that we are fulfilled by the good times we get from capitalism. However, in our more contemplative moments, there is a growing recognition that the good times really aren't that good anymore, and the compensatory gifts really don't compensate for the sense of absence and lack that gnaws away at those who allow themselves to feel and think, knowing but not wanting to know that something else, something better, really can be brought into existence.

In the contemporary intervallic period we know that capitalism and liberal democracy are far from perfect. We know of the deep harms they produce. We know about the inequality and injustice, the continued degradation of the natural environment, and capitalism's steadfast refusal to use its titanic strength to address the manifold problems that blight the developing

world. However, we remain attached to capitalism as it appears to be so much better than the alternatives. By comparison, everything else seems monotonous and dull, and, as we have been at pains to stress, every political system that is not built upon fair electoral practices appears tyrannical, oppressive and ‘inhuman’.

So, we know that capitalism cannot be placed firmly in the category of the Good. It is simply the ‘least worst’ (see Badiou, 2009; Žižek, 2009b, 2010). It is too aggressively individualistic. It is too competitive, and in capitalism’s interminable competition few appear to spare a thought for the losers. Growing numbers of people are cut adrift from mainstream economic life. Billions continue to live in desperate poverty (see Davis, 2007). We know that it is impossible for liberal capitalism to overcome its own internal contradictions or humanise its cold logic, and we know that its markets cannot truly be set to the task of solving the problems of contemporary economic globalisation. However, we also know that all alternatives were worse and always will be worse. In keeping with the faithless cynicism of our times, we assume everything to be flawed: every idea, every strident ideologue, every political party, every movement, every radical attempt to improve what exists. Our lethargy and distrust of ideology and change ensure that capitalism remains. Not perfect by any means, we conclude, but on balance probably the best of a bad bunch.

The historical dialectic has stalled. The contradictions inherent in the existing thesis have been disavowed, the antithesis has become fragmented and fudged, or for many simply abandoned, therefore no genuine synthesis is possible and the thesis – i.e. the existing system with all its logical imperatives, contradictions and inevitable deleterious outcomes – simply continues. It is in this shapeless and becalmed political interregnum that the often quite desperate and aimless logic of riot and protest is played out. The participants want change, but cannot conjure

up an image of something else that appears free from the flaws that appear to beset every political idea. They have not been equipped with a positive image of the new. So many protests these days are structured in relation to the protestors' desire for some authority to enact change on their behalf. Unconsciously, they want genuine change, but they end up asking for some authority to take the lead on reducing those things they dislike about the present. The same is true of contemporary riots. No progressive politics exists, and there is no seductive image of an ideological alternative for people to rally around. Instead, the riot is driven forward by an incoherent rabble of pissed off individuals who could have once formed a political community. The riot is more a depressive acting out of deep objectless frustration and anger than a concerted proto-political intervention demanding change. In most cases the only vague hope we have been able to identify among contemporary rioters is the desire to be re-included into the system whose unaltered logic marginalised them in the first place.

Many of our peers continue to romantically misconstrue riots as spontaneous political action driven by some mythical rebellious predisposition. They also tend to argue that we must abandon dialectical sophistry and discard philosophical abstraction. We must recognise and combat our own cynicism, put down our books and head out onto the streets to register our moral dissatisfaction with the existing order of things. If a genuine victory for the left is to come, we are told, it will be won on the streets and not in the lecture theatre or in the old party form. The moral weight of the crowd will bear down upon the polity until those who run things succumb to the pressure, embrace the marginalised and reconfigure the relationship between the state and the market.

These ambitions are entirely reasonable and it is certainly true that if genuine change is to come it will push past philosophical abstraction without a care. But shouldn't critical intellectuals be

ready with a few ideas for new political and socioeconomic frameworks in which these ambitions can actually be realised? Is it really a waste of time to think about how a post-capitalist economy might be structured? Is spontaneous action without prior positive thought and clearly outlined purpose really the way to go about things? Should we simply demand justice, and wait for it to be handed to us by a benevolent polity, or should we perhaps think through in some detail what kind of justice we want and how it might be brought about? What we need is a positive programme for change. We need to aspire to something different, something less scarred by the injustices of the present, and we need to work hard to define this new world and make it comprehensible and attractive to everyday people. Expressing our dissatisfaction with the present order of things will not lead to the change we need. Piecemeal reform will not save us.

Many complex issues that could shape a qualitatively different future need to be investigated. Is it possible to maintain our current lifestyles in the face of an ongoing energy crisis and impending resource wars? Can we put history into reverse gear and re-establish the modern social democratic state at a time in which the real economy appears to be reaching its objective material limits? Is it possible that the nation state could be truly democratised and retreat from the unforgiving cut and thrust of the global marketplace to focus upon new sustainable systems of national production and distribution, and do so in peaceful relations with other states? Could we re-establish comprehensive welfare states while at the same time creating new global and regional surplus recycling mechanisms? With the advent of sophisticated IT technology, is it possible to be even more ambitious and consider some sort of hybrid central/devolved democratic control of the financial economy? Is a steady-state economy possible? Could a citizens' wage be introduced in Western nations in a way that cushions economic downturns? How could such a thing be funded, and how might the state prevent further debilitating capital

flight? How can we deal with new advances in technology and orient them to social needs? How can we create enough meaningful jobs in the west to ensure full economic and social participation? The issues that demand attention appear endless, and answers to these questions and many more are still far from clear. While so many of those around us insist that now is the time for action, for us it is a time for critical reflection, fully engaged social research and deep thinking.

What counts as a radical intervention these days?

The left is failing to centralise these crucial questions in its debates, research programmes and academic literature. Its popular spokespeople continue to argue with consummate vagueness and celestial piety that more needs to be done to help the poor and the marginalised and to reduce the injustices of the current order. But this is simply a negative discourse that fails to create a meaningful alternative for everyday people to comprehend and aspire to. In pursuing these arguments in the absence of a genuinely transformative political agenda, our popular spokespeople join their competitors of the liberal right in enforcing a horizon of the possible. The liberal left argue vaguely that capitalism needs to be controlled to a greater degree, and the liberal right argue that it needs to be freed from state intervention. The limitations of this domesticated political jousting must now be clear for all to see. It is now incumbent upon the political left to rejuvenate its discourse and transform itself into something that inspires young people to believe that something better can actually be brought into existence. What the left really needs is a *realist utopianism*, a utopianism that connects a genuine faith that a better world can be created to a realistic understanding of just how difficult this task is and the scale of the work needed to make it possible. The first step for the left is to abandon its debilitating

and divisive discourse of identity politics and construct new accounts of universalism. We need to stop dreaming about our own personal freedoms and rediscover our historic commitment to the common good.

Social democracy remains the political philosophy of choice for the pragmatic postmodern socialist. The refusal to look beyond capitalism, and the aggressive denunciation of all those who propose a genuine return to history, ensures that our economy and society remain tied to the profit motive. It transforms the dialectics of change into a debate between the parliamentary left and the parliamentary right about the degree to which the state intervenes to regulate the destructive and asocial drive for personal gain. We are told that we must accept that the market remains capable of productive and organisational wonders. We must accept that the people remain bound to democracy and consumer culture and have no desire whatsoever to move on to an alternative socio-economic system. The job of the left then becomes the maintenance and administration of a process of regulation and control, usually light-touch because anything too heavy might 'upset the markets'.

We are happy to admit that a programme of social democratic control of capital would offer a revolutionary break from the present, roughly equivalent to the first social democratic revolution that followed the Second World War. Here we mean revolutionary in the weak sense, in the sense that, in comparison to the towering inequalities and injustices of the pre-war period, the rise of social democracy represented a genuinely progressive intervention. But the market remained. Capitalism was merely regulated; it was not defeated and replaced with something else.

We see this agenda at the core of SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain. These political parties possess considerable potential, and they represent a genuine challenge to the current neoliberal order. However, as with any revolutionary intervention, we need to acknowledge the considerable power of the forces of reaction. We took pains to point out earlier that of all the European movements emerging in the midst of contemporary crisis it was SYRIZA who offered the most radical, clearly outlined and economically literate political programme. However, if they win office in the near future, they will face significant pressure to abandon key elements of reform and water-down many of their policies. There will be threats and bribes, those at the forefront of the movement will be subjected to continuous media criticism, and in the background the immensely powerful forces of neoliberalism will gather their strength as they wait for the earliest opportunity to retake power. Because SYRIZA will be isolated in their attempt to contravene at least some of the rules of the global market, that opportunity will come sooner rather than later, and SYRIZA must be prepared for it.

SYRIZA will also be forced to confront intractable systemic problems in economy and culture. We should not simply assume that a return to social democracy would mean a return to the sustained growth of the post-war social democratic period. The specific factors that spurred post-war economic growth are absent in our own time. It will be very difficult for today's radical social democrats to engineer identifiable gains before they find themselves back before an electorate keen to see improvements in its standards of living. Five years of economic stagnation, even when they are accompanied by policies that seek to equalise social relations and combat inequality, might well boost support for neoliberal parliamentary parties who promise immediate gains. SYRIZA will quickly run into today's fundamental political truth: the vast majority of western citizens, the subjects of a combination of positive and negative belief, are actively involved in the reproduction of contemporary liberal capitalism. There is

no commonly held desire to overcome capitalism, and there is certainly no desire to ditch liberal democracy. Perhaps it is best to seek to reform what exists rather than completely abandon it in favour of something else. Perhaps the best the left can hope for these days is to regulate the market to a much greater degree. We would not dispute this point. We are certainly not against a sustained regulatory drive to extinguish capitalism's blazing excesses. However, this is not the only route open to us.

Our societies are individualised and depoliticised. An honest analysis of the recent riots and protests proves this rather dispiriting fact to all who are willing to look reality in the face. It does the left no favours to deny this reality and continue with the assumption that the poor are naturally orientated to equality. Even after a catastrophic collapse of financial markets there is no popular desire for revolution or for that matter the return of the very strong economically-grounded forms of social democratic regulation we saw immediately after the Second World War. However, as we have argued throughout this book, the crucial point is that *this situation results from the failures of the left as much as it does from the successes of the right*. The liberalisation of the left and its disregard for universalism, equality and social justice – principles abandoned in favour of diversity, tolerance, acceptance, social mobility, personal freedom and abstract-negative human rights – has created a huge chasm between the left and the precarious ex-working classes. The left has also steadfastly refused to engage its historical enemy on the field of political economy, and failed to outline and campaign for positive alternatives to the depressing morass of reductive populism and libidinal capture that is contemporary consumer culture. If the left is to gain ground and once again represent the interests of those exploited and dehumanised by the neoliberal project it needs to construct an accessible critique of what exists and present a viable and appealing alternative to it.

We are certainly not dismissive of a social democratic revival of the kind proposed by radical leftist parties across Europe. But the economic context is daunting. For instance, Britain today has accepted that it will import much of the goods it needs from low-wage economies abroad. If Britain attempted to grow production, it would have to withdraw from global markets and erect new trade barriers, or else it would have to compete against low-wage producers on price and quality. In terms of mineral wealth, we have already picked the low-hanging fruit. We already have diverse consumer markets, and we are already wracked with personal, household and state debt. Can we build a new social democracy in Britain in which secure and valued jobs are available to all? Can we fund an expansive welfare state? We must be cognizant of the problems we face in driving forward a reformist social democratic project, never mind a strong historic revolution that seeks to move beyond capitalism.

We must also recognise that capitalism's financial elite will fight hard against regulation. If, as Badiou maintains, 'communism' is an eternal Idea that returns in each epoch to have its basic maxim reconsidered, the same is true of the raw asociality of the profit motive. The neoliberal right will not easily admit defeat, turn over a new leaf and become diligent tax-payers and responsible citizens. They will attack the proponents of revitalised social democracy and argue vociferously that the interventionist state is eroding freedom and attacking the principles of western liberal societies. As contemporary parliamentary capitalism gradually removes the vestments of democratic accountability to reveal a new authoritarianism, perhaps it is not too outlandish to imagine counter-revolutionary military campaigns being waged against the 'terrorists' of the far left, who have besmirched the founding principles of liberal society by attempting to remove from the citizenry the wonderful gift of unrestrained economic freedom.

Social democracy would of course be a significant improvement upon what currently exists, but we should not settle upon social democracy as a transformative horizon. There is a world beyond this horizon if we are willing to explore it. One of the key lessons of critical theory is that the seemingly impossible can happen. What is, in the here and now, totally inconceivable can come to fruition. Only in the future, once the event has come to pass, are we granted the privilege of being able to identify the forces that made possible the transformative event.

We have tried, throughout this book, to marry a pessimism of the intellect to an optimism of the will. We need to cling on to utopianism, and we need to fight hard against those who would place limits on our imagination and our desire for something better. We should, of course, acknowledge the dismal state of contemporary leftist politics and the ideological incorporation of the majority, but we also need to believe that a better world is possible. Walter Benjamin's (1999) analysis of historical change in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* suggests that the failures of today can be redeemed in the future. Our failure to act in the present – our reticence and fearfulness, our abortive and failed attempts to enact change – does not collapse into complete non-existence. The series of set-backs the left experienced during Benjamin's time did not fully close off the possibility that, at some point in the future, things could be very different. For Benjamin, a future radical event can transform and rehabilitate our failures and their place in history.

Since the start of the neoliberal era the left has gone from defeat to defeat to defeat. The left today, in Britain especially, is in total disarray. But the crucial point is that the nature of its failure has changed. As it reformed, fragmented and softened itself in the post-war era it did not incrementally fail better but in fact *failed worse*. In the process of liberalisation and decline, as we have argued throughout the book, the left abandoned many of its core principles and lost

touch with the sectors of the population it purports to represent. Key constituencies on the left have capitulated to the logic of the deregulated market, and most on the left today accept liberal democracy and its faux-egalitarianism. Multicultural tolerance, the discourse of rights and the primacy of defensive individualism have replaced the traditional principle of universal egalitarianism. The left and the right have in recent years both succumbed to an insubstantial liberalism totally incapable of delivering its promise of panoramic freedom.

In the vacuum created by the evaporation of the left the triumph of neoliberal capitalism appears all around us. This triumph has been such that across the continent most mainstream leftist parliamentary groups accept the inevitability of the free market. The diaphanous liberalised left offers no clear alternative. But despite all this, the future is not written. Following Benjamin, the pattern of leftist failure and defeat can be broken. Each passing day offers the opportunity to radically change things. The impossible can happen. For it to do so at some point in the future, the left must learn once again to take advantage of the inevitable crises that the capitalist market will cause. It must learn to fail better and thus transform its trajectory from decline to incline. Then rather than blindly rioting and protesting in a negativistic manner against our various dissatisfactions, we would rediscover in our intellectual life something concrete to aspire to and campaign for.